



Underrepresentation and Exclusion: The Hidden Curriculum in Language Textbooks of Basic Level Education in Nepal

Bhuban Bahadur Bohara*, Purna Bahadur Lamichhane, Indira Kumari Chaulagain

Submission:

Apr 13, 2026

Acceptance:

May 25, 2026

Published:

Jun 30, 2026

Tribhuvan University Sanathimi Campus

*Corresponding Author: bbhuwan@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.66412/ed.v35i2.110>

Abstract

This study delves into the portrayal of gender in Nepal's Grade 5 language textbooks: the Nepali Textbook (Grade 5 (NTB5)) and the English Textbook (Grade 5 (ETB5)). For this, content analysis was employed as the research method to explore visual illustrations, textual references, authorship patterns, and narrative motifs. Results were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative inquiry reveals a persistent male predominance with 72% of illustrations and 55–59% of textual mentions attributing (males) to males. Female authorship is starkly underrepresented in ETB5 and conspicuously absent in NTB5. Qualitative thematic analysis revealed four interconnected patterns that reinforced traditional gender roles: women's confinement to the domestic domain, men's authoritative and agentic position, women's passive and controlled empowerment, and symbolic and linguistic attempts to normalize existing gender identities. These biased gender representations in the school textbooks serve as hidden curriculum of deep-seated patriarchy and assists to normalize gender imbalance persisting in the society. These findings, which pose a question mark upon Nepal's policy level advocacy for gender equality, reveal the hidden curriculum, subtly orienting young learners into patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Gender representation, gender roles, gender stereotypes, hidden curriculum, patriarchal norms

To cite this article:

Bohara, B. B., Lamichhane, P. B. & Chaulagain, I. K. (2026). Underrepresentation and exclusion: The hidden curriculum in language textbooks of basic level education in Nepal. *Education and Development*, 35(2). 79–89. <https://doi.org/10.66412/ed.v35i2.110>

Introduction

Education not only nurtures human capital essential for a nation's operational stability; it is also broadly acknowledged as a fundamental instrument for upholding social justice and promoting inclusive progress. Consequently, to realize and reinforce social justice as ensured by the Constitution, educational institutions and their associated curricula are designed as structured framework upholding inclusivity as a central principle (Gasa, 2017). Curricula, in the words of Smucker (2022), are "welcoming, accessible, challenging, flexible, intentional, and authentic (p.1)" educational documents that make attempts to address systemic discrimination and the diverse needs of all learners, including content, teaching methods, and assessment strategies.

However, studies indicate that school curricula fail to accomplish the promises of inclusivity in the truer sense, as the underlying structural biases—largely influenced

by power relations and favouritisms toward privileged social groups—remain mutedly present as a byproduct of interactions within traditional values, norms, and culture, thereby hindering them (Escayg, 2019; Joseph & Alhassan, 2023). Within this context, careful assessment of curricular materials becomes instrumental in countries like Nepal, which are prone to biases in curriculum due to features such as an overwhelmingly patriarchal social structure (Suchana, 2025); low-income status and the impact of regional vulnerability, as in South Asia (Crawford et al., 2014); a diverse population (Smucker, 2022); entrenched stereotypes (Dawar & Anand, 2017); and the developing stage of textbook writing and its development processes (Shah, 2016). Hence, this article attempts to assess gender representation in the language textbooks used in Nepali schools, focusing gender biases, stereotyping of gender roles, and reinforcement or countering of gender roles.

Grade five in Nepali education system is at a strategical positioning because of children at the brink of adolescence



as the learners; vulnerable to the peer influences; making fifth grade textbooks an optimal site for assessing gender representation. It is the age when gender stereotypes consolidate and become more rigid, as children rapidly internalize the social norms (Kornienko et al., 2016; Singh & Chandel, 2022). At this backdrop, any depiction such as girls being “vulnerable” and boys “strong/independent” lead to deep-rooted gender understanding (Blum et al., 2017, Lanks, 2018), which further reinforces the concepts of gender segregation, reinforcing societal stereotypes, being further backed by peer and societal influence at this age (Kornienko et al., 2016; Sims et al., 2021). Thus, a study of these textbooks focusing gender representation becomes crucial at this developmental stage.

If textbooks fail to counter these influences, they strengthen vulnerability to entrenched gendered ideas (Ullah et al., 2014). There is a need of such textbooks that would facilitate to foster inclusive and equitable attitudes in the future youths by presenting an equitable and balanced representation of gender. In Nepali context, persistent biases are identified in primary level textbooks (including Social Studies), underscoring the significance of focused analysis at this grade to show the way ahead to curriculum reforms (Shah, 2015).

This study aims to investigate how gender is depicted in two language textbooks of Grade 5, i.e.; Nepali Grade 5 (NTB5) and English Grade 5 (ETB5) and to assess the extent to which male and female characters are visible in terms of their occurrence, role distribution, and prominence. Further, it seeks to delve into how the narratives, linguistic structures, and illustrations in these textbooks reinforce or challenge traditional gender stereotypes in the textbooks by analyzing the portrayal of male and female characters in different roles, occupations, and activities.

Nepal’s Policy Framework and Its Disconnect in Textbooks

According to the 2015 Constitution of Nepal, the state of Nepal is “an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive, democratic, socialism-oriented, federal democratic republican state” [Article 4]. This definition demonstrates that the country prioritizes equal treatment of its citizens and ensures social justice and equality to them. The government utilizes education as a tool to fulfill constitutional obligations by making policies that pave the path to these commitments made to the public. The policy documents such as National Education Policy 2076, National Gender Equality Policy of 2077, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy for 2021-2023, and National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820 are some of such initiatives from the state to ensure social equality and justice.

However, a significant disconnect between the policies’ promises and what’s actually happening is starkly visible particularly when we look at how women are depicted in Nepal’s school textbooks. Studies show that often textbooks reinforce gendered roles and subtly reinforce the status quo

in the society (Andersen, 2024; Para, 2024). This article is an attempt to analyze gender representation in Nepal’s ETB5 and NTB5 to assess patterns of equality and bias.

Schools, Curriculum, and Gender

Schools are dynamic spaces where social realities are presented in their microcosmic form, and they serve as institutions of socialization and acculturation (Bohara, 2025b; Inayah et al., 2026). Curricular materials and classroom contexts are instrumental in sharing and transferring social values through hierarchical or peer interactions. Against this backdrop, schools and curricular materials like textbooks are places where society’s traditional practices and beliefs intersect with the idea of social justice and quite often collide (Milligan et al., 2025). Hence, to meet curricular goals and to maintain social justice as a promise committed by the Constitution, such materials need to be designed carefully, considering diversity, inclusion, and equitable representation (Andersen, 2024).

Hence, classrooms—microcosms of society, where teachers and students come up with their underlying beliefs (Bohara, 2025b) and where English itself can simultaneously act as a tool of empowerment and a mechanism of exclusion for marginalized groups (Paneru et al., 2026)—are the places of socialization, conceptualization, and consolidation of social beliefs and cultural constructs largely assisted by the textbooks (Suchana, 2025). Classrooms are expected to be gender neutral in terms of school policies, enacted pedagogy, and curricular artefacts, yet disparity in gender representation is often observed. This disparity is visible as uneven representation of males and females (Crawford, et al., 2014; Islam & Asadullah, 2018), problematic gender friendliness (Shah, 2016), male domination in language use and portrayal of males in considerably prestigious roles (Bachore & Semela, 2022), sexism through language and illustrations (Christos, 2025), etc. Such disparities caused by the underlying gendered dynamics of society pose challenge to the objectives of education.

Grade 5 in Nepal’s Education System

In Nepal, children typically start the first grade of school education at 5-6 years of age resulting those of 10-11 years enter grade 5. This is the late childhood and the approaching point of early stages of adolescence when children begin to develop their personal moral dimensions as well as they encounter several physical, intellectual, psychological, and social changes (Cleveland Clinic Medical, 2025)—sometimes leading to undesirable social outcomes (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2020). Because overwhelming peer influence during this period children are vulnerable to reinforcing underlying stereotypes in the society (Sims et al., 2021). In this context, the school curriculum and textbooks either serve as controllable formal counterforce that can actively promote gender equality and social justice or docile advocates to entrenched gender biases (Mahmood et al., 2022).

According to current school education structures grade 5

comes under the basic level (Grades 1-8). At this level, education plays a significant role in developing children's identities (Agha et al., 2017). The students in this grade, who normally fall under the age group of 9-11 years are at a key transitional point where they acquire essential skills before they can start their studies in higher grades along with being socialized among peers. The Nepal Education Fact Sheets 2022 reports that Nepal achieved a primary level completion rate of approximately 82% overall which included 83% completion for girls and 81% completion for boys (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2023). This achievement shows progress in girls' access to basic education yet gender-related obstacles continue to exist because schools need to implement gender-sensitive curricula which include textbooks that challenge stereotypes and create equal educational opportunities (Gurung & Rajbanshi, 2020).

Cognitive and Attitudinal Risks of Gender Bias

Children of 10-11 years age group are emotionally and cognitively vulnerable as they get influenced by multiple factors. In such a case, any questionable input, that is bias or stereotypical can contribute to the internalization of rigid gender norms, potentially leading to long-term attitudinal biases and limited equitable perspectives in adulthood (Blumberg, 2008; Lewis et al., 2021). Thus, gender bias in textbooks (GBIT) can contribute to serious cognitive and attitudinal harm in children and may limit the development of a balanced, unbiased, and equitable understanding of gender roles in society. Textbooks frequently manifest societal stereotypes through their character portrayals in traditional gender roles, such as males are depicted as leaders who seek adventure and work in professional fields while females are portrayed in domestic spaces providing care and nurture (Blumberg, 2008; Kookiatikoon et al., 2024; Mahmood et al., 2022).

Consequences of Stereotypical Representations

Biased representation of gender roles in textbooks can limit children's cognitive flexibility while it restricts their self-perception and future ambitions and it maintains fixed gender stereotypes. Educational materials containing such stereotypes are likely to decrease self-esteem especially in girls while they restrict career ambitions and enforce gender-based norms for conduct and professional roles (Rong et al., 2021; Sharma & Basnet, 2024). Normally, teachers may check such stereotypical biases in the textbooks, however; they fail to pay attention to nuances and dimensions of gender disparities because of their restricted English language competency or societal effects (Bohara, 2025a; Vu & Pham, 2022). Hence, the impact of these stereotypical representations spread from textbook to pedagogy making the classroom a site to reinforce existing gender norms.

Global Patterns of Gender Bias

Gender bias in school textbooks is consistently reported by academia worldwide. This is visible in the form of

underrepresentation of women or their depiction confined to domestic roles, perpetuating patriarchal norms (Blumberg, 2008; Islam & Asadullah, 2018), which serves as a hidden curriculum that "despite the increasing awareness with regards to the issues in gender equality, ...continue to push on the traditional gender roles" (Cairo et al., 2024, p. 162). This, rather than encountering, reinforces the traditional gender roles, sidelining the issues of women empowerment and equity, making classrooms vulnerable to gender issues.

The portrayal of females and males in the text and images in textbooks shapes students' concepts about gender and their self-image, which in turn influences their social behaviour and aspirations (Dawar & Anand, 2017). Therefore, any bias underlying in textbooks may seriously affect mental schema of children. Studies such as Crawford et al. (2024) indicate that low- and lower-middle-income countries exhibit a higher degree of gender bias in textbooks than upper-middle and high-income countries. This indicates that countries like Nepal are vulnerable to this problem.

Studies reveal some visible patterns of gender biases presenting in the textbooks across the world. Some common biases globally observed are: underrepresentation of women (Crawford et al., 2014; Dawar & Anand, 2017; Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Suchana, 2025), Stereotyping across occupational roles, personality traits, and activities, as well as the internalization of stereotypes that constrain development (Bachore & Semela, 2022; Crawford et al., 2014; Dawar & Anand, 2017; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Li, 2025; Sharma & Basnet, 2024; Suchana, 2025; Tiwari, 2014), association with domesticity vs. achievement (Crawford et al., 2014; Tiwari, 2014), bias in language use (Bachore & Semela, 2022; Dawar & Anand, 2017), sexist language (Christos, 2025); uneven portrayal in social roles and spaces (Suchana, 2025; Tiwari, 2014), distorted and limited imagery (Dawar & Anand, 2017; Suchana, 2025), and perpetuate traditional gender roles (Thulasivanthana, 2025).

Hidden Curriculum and Gender Representation: Our Theoretical Framework

The hidden curriculum refers to implicit messages, social values, norms, and beliefs transmit through educational resources and classroom practices explicitly. They are not overtly stated in formal curriculum (Apple, 1971; Chao, 2011) nor encompassed in formal teaching learning activities. Instead, they are implicitly conveyed through classroom practices, shared values, and experiences (Rossouw & Frick, 2023). Despite their close resemblance to national policy objectives, textbooks frequently transmit significant messages that contradict to the policy assurances on gender equality. These contradictions appear through omissions, stereotypical representations, or the unequal portrayal of male and female characters (Crawford et al., 2014; Islam & Asadullah, 2018), which ultimately reinforces Apple's (1971) concept on hidden curriculum that is supposed to constitute "norms and values that are implicitly, but effectively, taught in schools" (p. 27). Such "implicit and

explicit transfer of norms... [that] shape [students'] culture and values" (Azimpour and Khalilzade, 2015, p. 18) is manifested in the form of visual representations, character assignments, linguistic choices, and spatial depictions of characters of all genders.

Textbook portrayal of men as leaders, explorers and public figures, and women as homemakers, nurturers, and passive members of society normalizes the existing gender understanding of society and draws a pattern that conveys to children a sense of "who is suited for what." In Nepal, these implicit messages unemotionally consolidate the patriarchal structures despite constitutional guarantees of equality (Apple, 1971). This study, hence, assesses gender representation in NTB5 and ETB5 as an unacknowledged hidden curriculum.

Methods and Materials

This study employed Content Analysis (CA) as a method, which "allows researchers to investigate the meanings embedded within texts" (Leavy, 2022, p. 159) and enables researchers to "understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 318). Two textbooks published by CDC, NTB5 (2080 B.S.) and ETB5 (2023 A.D.) were selected as they are compulsory in community schools nationwide. Data were interpreted to uncover the hidden curriculum of gender conceptualization in textbooks (Apple, 1971; Chao, 2011).

Data were coded using ATLAS.ti9 software. In the beginning, the deductive codes based upon the codebook drawn from established gender representation studies (e.g., Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Suchana, 2025; Tiwari, 2014). The codebook encompassed four literature-derived categories plus one emergent category (see Table 2). Considering the flexibility of a qualitative study, inductive codes that emerged during the coding process were also added to the analysis (Forman & Damschroder, 2007). Findings combine quantitative mapping with qualitative thematic analysis. Frequency counts for gender visibility (illustrations, textual mentions, and authorship) were conducted manually by the researcher to ensure accurate contextual interpretation (see Table 2).

Table 2: Coding Categories, Sub-Categories, and Example Codes

Category	Sub-Category	Example Code
Visibility	Pictorial representation	Male-only illustration
Roles	Domestic roles	Female domestic role
Traits	Passive behavior	Female passive behaviour
Places	Private/domestic spaces	Indoor activities for women
Symbolic*	Gendered symbolism*	Masculinity symbols*

Note. Codes marked with * were emergent, generated inductively during analysis. Unmarked codes were

deductive, derived from established theoretical frameworks.

An Introduction to Grade 5 Nepali and English Textbooks Used in the Study

These textbooks, i.e. NTB5 and ETB 5, are designed as primary tools to deliver curricular objectives and the aims of National Curriculum Framework. They share a common publishing lineage under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Government of Nepal. Both were first released in their current editions in 2023 (2080 B.S.). ETB5 emphasizes the development of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) through 17 thematic units. NTB5 follows a similar integrated approach, focusing on literacy, moral values, and life skills.

Table 1: Structural and Preliminary Data for Content Analysis

Feature	NTB5	ETB5
Total Page Count	184 + 8 preliminary pages	212 + 6 preliminary pages
Publisher / Authority	Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Sanathimi	Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), Sanathimi
Unit/Lesson Count	15	17
Illustrations Included	Yes	Yes
Content Analyzed	Full text + images	Full text + images

Results and Discussion

Results are discussed in this section majorly focusing gender representation in the textbook contents. The discussion is presented in gender visibility, assigned gender roles, gender traits, and gender-wise assignment of spaces in the society in NTB5 and ETB5. This approach allows for an assessment of gender visibility and inclusivity patterns, providing insight into how textbooks might either reinforce or challenge existing gender norms.

Gender-wise Visibility in Textbooks

To assess gender representation in the language textbooks of grade 5, gender-wise visibility is the first category discussed. This is discussed in three sub-categories: depiction of male/female characters in illustrations and pictures, male/female proper nouns and pronouns, and male/female contributors.

Gender Representation in Illustrations and Pictures

Illustrations in textbooks convey meanings better than the words to young learners (Suchana, 2025), making them vital for reinforcing gender understanding. To assess visibility, human character depictions were manually counted across both textbooks (see Table 3).

Table 3: Gender Distribution in Illustrations

Textbook	Male Only	Female Only	Mixed	Total (N)
NTB5	23 (42.6%)	15 (27.8%)	16 (29.6%)	54
ETB5	35 (37.6%)	26 (28.0%)	32 (34.4%)	93

Note. Pictures were counted manually; images in the same page in the separate frames are counted separately; and images with unidentifiable gender are excluded.

Table 3 shows that there is a consistent male dominance in illustrations. Combining male-only and mixed-gender images, males appear in 72.2% of NTB5 (male-only: 42.6%; mixed: 29.6%) and 72.0% of ETB5 (male-only: 37.6%; mixed: 34.4%) illustrations featuring human characters. By contrast, female-only depictions are less frequent (NTB5: 27.8%; ETB5: 28.0%). This disparity in the male and female representation in the illustrations suggests a hidden curriculum favoring male visibility (Chao, 2011), where male figures are frequently granted greater visual prominence, while female characters are often confined to supportive or background positions. These patterns mirror underlying processes of gendering and stereotyping (Li, 2025; Tiwari, 2014).

There is a significance imbalance in the distribution of human characters within the textbooks. This indicates the continued reinforcement of established gender norms. This imbalance functions as a hidden curriculum that replicates the dominant culture; specifically, male-superiority in

the society (Chao, 2011). In both textbooks, male-only representations are more prevalent than female-only representations, thereby indicating a consistent pattern of dominant male visibility.

This imbalance transcends mere numerical presence and encompasses the characterizations patterns as well. It is observed that male figures frequently occupy more prominent and active roles, whereas female characters are often relegated to more limited or supportive positions. These patterns reflect underlying processes of gendering and stereotyping, which, in conjunction, contribute to the formation of gendered identities (Li, 2025; Tiwari, 2014). As a result, these representations indicate a deep-seated gender bias within educational materials, thereby reinforcing conventional social norms and potentially shaping learners' understandings of gender roles.

Visibility of Male and Female Characters in the Texts

To observe gender representation pattern in the selected textbooks, all mentions of the male and female individuals were counted in across texts, exercises, and preliminary pages. This counting included personal pronouns (where applicable), character names, gendered kinship terms (eg., father, mother, etc.), and reference to gendered professions, roles, or descriptors (eg., boy/man/girl, etc.) While doing so, personal pronouns, character names, gender identified by profession, or mentions as boys and men were also considered. For ETB5, third person pronouns were fully included (for their gendered features); however, in NTB5, they were excluded due to their gender-neutral form and reliance on verb inflections for gender cues, which prevents reliable objective counting.

Table 4: Gender Visibility in Textual Mentions

Category	ETB5 Male % (n)	NTB5 Male % (n)	NTB5 Female % (n)	ETB5 Female % (n)
Pronouns	52% (228)	—	—	48% (207)
Kinship Terms	57% (89)	52% (169)	48% (156)	43% (66)
Character Mentions	57% (261)	62% (398)	38% (243)	43% (197)
Overall	55% (578)	59% (567)	41% (399)	45% (470)

Note. Percentages are calculated within each textbook/category. Pronouns are excluded for NTB5 due to gender-neutral forms.

Table 4 shows that both textbooks exhibit male-dominant textual representation. In ETB5, third-person pronouns show near gender parity (52% male vs. 48% female). However, kinship terms and character mentions show a male bias, with 57% (n = 89) of the instances. Cumulatively, ETB5 shows a slight male over-representation (55%). This suggests that, despite similar pronoun usage, males are more prominent in terms of character appearances, family roles, and narrative focus.

In contrast, NTB5 shows a considerably stronger male dominance (59% male to 41% female), however, kinship

terms are almost equal (52% male). Similarly, character mentions reveal a significant male bias (62% vs. 38%). This observation highlights the congruency of textbook representation with the societal structures representing male dominance. It suggests that men are provided disproportionately larger textual prominence, while women are represented with less frequency and less emphasis—a trend that resonates with the hidden curriculum of male centrality (Crawford et al., 2014).

Gender Visibility of Content Authors

Authorship was assessed by categorizing credited authors by gender. For ETB5, only poetry components listed authors (11 poems, 12 author contributions due to one poem contributed by two authors). For NTB5, authors were

identified for 10 of 15 lessons—all male. Manual counts are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Gender Distribution of Authors in Textbooks

Textbook	Female Authors % (n)	Male Authors % (n)	Total Entries (N)
ETB5	42% (5)	58% (7)	12
NTB5	0% (0)	100% (10)	10
Overall	23% (5)	77% (17)	22

Note. Percentages calculated within each textbook. Only credited text are counted. Co-authors and repeated contributors are counted separately.

Table 5 reveals disproportionate male dominance in authorship. In ETB5 there is visible male dominance (58% males compared to 42% females), however, in NTB5 there is total exclusion of female authors. This results in an overwhelming overall gender imbalance in credited authors (77% are males). This reinforces a hidden curriculum that reinforces the male dominance in society, presenting males as the prominent knowledge-producer (Apple, 1971).

Considering the susceptibility of fifth-grade students, who are at a crucial developmental phase and particularly receptive to absorbing core social beliefs and values, the underrepresentation of female authors in textbooks could inadvertently convey a concealed message of male dominance within the context of formal education. This implicit bias may, in effect, challenge the gender equality-related constitutional mandates of the country.

Both Nepali and global literature in curriculum studies have repeatedly documented a skewed representation of male favouritism in curricular materials (Blumberg, 2009; Tiwari, 2014). Likewise, these biased representations observed so far in this study manifested in character depictions and narrative functions contradict the gender equality principles articulated in official policy documents (National Gender Equality Policy of 2077, 2020). The visible bias found in character references and text narratives acts as a hidden curriculum that reinforces existing gender disparities and patriarchal structures within curricular materials (Cairo et al., 2024).

The quantitative data clearly demonstrate a numerical disparity in gender visibility; however, these statistics alone do not elucidate how gender is constructed within textbook narratives. To understand the qualitative aspects of this representation, including the roles of men and women, the traits associated with each gender, and the symbolic meanings in the texts, a thematic analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti9 software.

In the subsequent section, four principal themes: (1) the domestic sphere as a female domain, (2) masculine agency and authority, (3) female passivity and conditional empowerment, and (4) the symbolic and linguistic construction of gender; that emerged from the coding of

over 200 textual and visual references are presented.

Thematic Analysis of Gendered Narratives

The Domestic Sphere as a Female Domain

In these textbooks, female characters are predominantly portrayed within the domestic and confined sphere, like in prior research on South Asian textbooks (Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Crawford et al., 2014). Frequently, women are attributed with nurturing and caregiving responsibilities. For instance, in the tenth lesson of the NTB5, there is a short story, "*Jambiyang Ko Janmdin*" ("Jambiyang's Birthday"), the female character, the mother, is portrayed performing the daily routine of domestic chores. The sentence in the short story (p.107), "*Aama le pahuna ka lagi awashyak peya padarth tayar garn thalnu bhayo*" ("Mother began preparing necessary drinks for guests"), indicates her confinement to non-agentic tasks. Similarly, female characters are depicted in nurturing roles very frequently. In the same book, a sentence in an exercise (p. 162) depicts women as a homemaker ["*Balak ki ama le tuki balnu bhayo*" ("The child's mother lit lamp")].

Even when women appear outside the home, their roles revert to caregiving. In ETB5, a mother camel elucidates biological characteristics of eyelids (p. 126), stating, "They are the protective covers for the eyes", thereby solidifying the expectation that women primarily fulfill educational roles within the family. This portrayal resembles the findings of Tiwari (2014) that women are represented as caretakers, which restricts their identity to agentic roles in the societal domain.

Masculine Agency and Authority

On the other hand, male characters in the textbooks are depicted as active agents, engaging in public spaces and exercising decision-making authority. Their agentic roles are spread throughout the books. They are presented as 'initiators of an action' as in NTB5 Lakhani of the one act play "*Sajha Sampatti*" (Common Assets) to offer performance of drama in school function, Manjushree to drain the water of the huge lake and turn it into habitable valley; or a "savior" as the king of the short story "*King's Portrait*" was described as "Everyone in his kingdom lived happily under his rule" (NTB5, p. 186); 'The protector,' as the shepherd in the mountain in Gordon Nightingale's poem was portrayed as he "takes good care of his sheep" (p. 13) and watches wild leopards to keep them from their claws on flock" (p. 14) ; 'the provider' as Simon is presented as the provider of golden goose to the King's daughter; 'the arbiter' as the King who offers her daughter's hand to Simon in return of her smile and Simon's father whom he asks, "Father, let me go into the forest and cut wood" (p. 135); "decision maker and controller of the family security" as in the short story entitled "A villager and his money", the villager says to her wife, "You know it isn't safe to go to bed without locking the door... Why didn't you lock it?" (p. 123). These examples portray males as responsible protectors and the female as docile follower and dependent.

Similarly, leadership roles in the textbooks are heavily gendered. Females are shown in leadership positions, such as a female headteacher, Dolma, but it is quite insignificant in comparison to that of the males, who are abundant throughout the content, including kings, shepherds, and community leaders. Further, they are flagged as intelligent, strong, and responsible. For example, the king (in the King's Portrait) is described as "very intelligent and kind" (p. 181), which connects masculinity with intelligence. On the other hand, females are portrayed as one who "enjoyed talking to her neighbour" (ETB5, p. 122) or less responsible as in "When she came home, she went straight to bed but forgot to lock the back door" (ETB5, p. 122). This difference reinforces the hidden curriculum, suggesting that leadership and intellect are naturally male traits (Bachore & Semela, 2022).

Female Passivity and Conditional Empowerment

The analysis of both textbooks showed a pattern of female passivity. There are instances where female characters are depicted as emotional or dependent: "By the time they came downstairs Melinda cried and cried" (ETB5, p. 129). Here, Melinda is depicted weak despite she herself has made the snowman. In another case, in the short story "The Golden Goose" the king's daughter was described as "so sad and had been bored for a long time" (ETB5, p. 135), linking femininity with melancholy and inactivity.

When females exhibit agency, it is often conditional and compromised. Their agency is not associated with authority but with grace, tenderness, and obedience. In NTB5, there includes statements like "Ma vidyalay ko niyam palana garchhu" ("I follow the school rules," p. 66) are made by female characters, whereas male characters are shown revolting or exploring (e.g., Male characters like Jambiyang in NTB5, who hurled the plate and breaks it). Even in instances where agency appears possible, such as a girl assuming the role of class monitor or police officer the narrative frequently redirects attention to male influence. This observation, which depicts women as 'introvert and passive,' aligns with the similar conclusion made by Crawford et al.'s study. (2014) and Suchana (2025). These could potentially inhibit girls from embracing assertive positions.

Symbolic and Linguistic Construction of Gender

Textbooks, beyond their direct content, use symbolic language to reinforce gender roles. According to Kumar et al. (2025) textbooks often portray men as breadwinners and women as caregivers in societies where traditional gender norms are entrenched. This pattern is seen in these observations too. Male characters, often, are depicted as strong, assertive, and masculine. For example, a girl, Melinda, builds a snowman and decorates it with her father's preferred tie and her father's hat (p. 129). Similarly, the short story "The Golden Goose" symbolizes the male as provider; the princess is content due to the goose's beauty, yet Simon (male) acquires the fortune and marries her. This endowment of masculinity endeavours to re-establish the

gender status quo. Gender identity in the textbooks is also assigned by physical characteristics: boys are characterized as "big" (implying strength), whereas girls are described as "tall and slim" (ETB5, p. 84) with "long dark hair" (ETB5, p. 150), thereby prioritizing aesthetics over competence. These subtle cues function as a symbolic structure that bolsters male supremacy (Suchana, 2025). As a result, symbolic and linguistic components operate as a hidden curriculum, legitimizing gender-based power dynamics that extend beyond overt portrayals.

Overall Patterns of Gendered Representation

Concerning general patterns in gendered representation, the qualitative observations align with the quantitative data, indicating that gender inequality surpasses simple numerical differences, thereby shaping the narrative framework of both textbooks. While men are frequently depicted in dominant positions in public life, leadership, and intellectual fields, women are often assigned to domestic duties, caregiving roles, and subordinate positions. Even when women achieve leadership roles, such as Dolma as headteacher (ETB5, p. 7) or women depicted as police officers and doctors in the "Jobs" exercise (pp. 146-147), their leadership positions are depicted less agentic (Dolma leading teacher and a police officer as traffic police officer). These portrayals often highlight qualities associated with relationships and care, rather than the use of power.

Symbolic narratives, moreover, reinforce gender-based power structures, transcending the explicit subject matter. For instance, in "The Golden Goose" (ETB5), the mother figure offers sustenance, presenting "a fine big cake and a bottle of apple juice." The father, on the other hand, establishes the rules and allows Simon to go into the woods. This creates a situation where male authority is emphasized, and female contributions are less important. Likewise, Melinda adorning a snowman with her father's hat and tie (p. 129) signifies an "endowment of masculinity." The complete set of these portrayals in their totality functions to sustain traditional gender roles that exist among Grade 5 students.

The National Gender Equality Policy of 2077 (2020) declares government efforts to achieve gender parity; however, NTB5 and ETB5 materials continue to present a male-dominated viewpoint through their untaught content. The narratives included in this work show certain elements while leaving out other essential subjects. The observed trend, discovered through qualitative analysis, confirms the quantitative findings presented in Tables 3–5. These results underscore the uneven distribution of gender representation in the textbooks, which leans towards male-centrality.

Conclusion

The study investigated gender representation in Grade 5 English and Nepali textbooks of Nepal through the concept of hidden curriculum (Apple, 1971; Chao, 2011), employing content analysis. The findings reveal gender differences that significantly disconnect with policy directives

and the constitutional commitment to gender equality (Nepal's Constitution, 2015; National Gender Equality Policy- 2077, 2020). The research found that textbooks transmit a hidden curriculum of male superiority and female subordination through unequal visibility, space in narrative, and gendered role assignment. The quantitative findings show that women are less visible in textbooks than males, resulting in the normalization of gender bias. Qualitative analysis identified four interconnected patterns: women are depicted as passive, dependent, and emotionally fragile; and men are depicted as agentic decision-makers and authority figures. In addition, symbolic and linguistic elements reinforce gendered hierarchies by associating masculinity with strength and leadership and femininity with beauty, obedience, and supportive roles.

Findings of the study posit that school textbooks covertly reinforce the societal norms of gender. Despite the equality promises made by the policy document, the uneven distribution of power and agency across genders in society is replicated in the textbooks, which might normalize the existing gender disparities in society. This may pacify the efforts towards gender equality and reinforce existing disparity and symbolic patriarchal oppression (Suchana, 2025). Moreover, the fifth graders are most vulnerable to peer and societal influence. Therefore, their conceptualization of social constructs at this developmental stage has deep impacts on their future understanding of society. Hence, this study paves the path to further inquiries in this field, which could use classroom observations and student interviews as well as longitudinal studies to investigate how textbook depictions impact students' development of their gender identities. The further research may extend beyond the current textual analysis because it will uncover hidden curricular elements that educational institutions act to implement and manage, and contest.

Education not only passively distributes knowledge, but it is also a platform to discuss, solidify, or change the values of society (Niazi, 2025). Nepal's Grade 5 textbooks' hidden curriculum promotes patriarchal standards, which impacts young learners in shaping their gender understanding (Tiwari 2024). The constitutional goal of creating an inclusive and equitable society needs curriculum developers to move from basic to complete representation, which shows female characters as strong and diverse leaders who hold equal value with male characters who work together in care-based relationships through which all genders receive equal recognition of their worth. Textbooks will function as social justice tools only after that point because they currently operate as unintentional drivers of social inequality. In light of these concerns, the study emphasizes the necessity of a critical assessment of gender parity and representation in the textbooks to address policy mandates.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the University Grant Commission (UGC) Kathmandu for the opportunity for Faculty research (FRG-80/81-Edu-04). This article is written as a complement to

the research report.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

Funding: Not received particularly for this article.

Authorship

Bhuban Bahadur Bohara: Conceptualization, Methodology, Literature Review, Coding, Formal analysis.

Purna Bahadur Lamichhane: Literature Review, Copy editing

Indira Kumari Chaulagain: Reading and precoding of textbooks

References

- Agha, N., Syed, G. K., & Mirani, D. A. (2017). Exploring the representation of gender and identity: Patriarchal and citizenship perspectives from the primary level Sindhi textbooks in Pakistan. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 66, 17–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.11.009>
- Andersen, N. (2024). Enhancing inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility (IDEA) in open textbook publishing: The development of a guide. *Open Praxis*, 16(4), 677–686. <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.16.4.687>
- Apple, M. W. (1971). The hidden curriculum and the nature of conflict. *Interchange*, 2(4), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02287080>
- Azimpour, E., & Khalilzade, A. (2015). Hidden curriculum. *World Essays Journal*, 3(1), 18–21. <https://tinyurl.com/3k7whuhn>
- Bachore, M., & Semela, T. (2022). Is gender-bias in textbooks spilled over from schools to universities? Evidence from Ethiopian university English language course textbooks. *Cogent Education*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2022.2152616>
- Bajovic, M., & Rizzo, K. (2020). Meta-moral cognition: bridging the gap among adolescents' moral thinking, moral emotions and moral actions. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 26(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1867206>
- Blumberg, R. L. (2008). The invisible obstacle to educational equality: gender bias in textbooks. *Prospects*, 38(3), 345–361. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-009-9086-1>
- Bohara, B. B. (2025a). Becoming the Teacher, I once feared English: A journey from rural Nepal to urban classrooms. *AMC Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 4(1), 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.3126/amrj.v4i1.78676>

- Bohara, B. B. (2025b). English teachers in multilingual classrooms: Ideological stances and experiences. *International Journal of Didactical Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.33902/ijods.202528280>
- Cairo, J. P. A., Crampatan, K. F. C., Gallos, D. J. R., & Escarlos, G. S. (2024). Classroom codes: Feminist perspective on hidden curriculum and their impact on student gender roles. *International Journal of All Research Writings*, 6(6), 162–174. <https://tinyurl.com/2z7wusem>
- Chao, T. (2011). The hidden curriculum of cultural content in internationally published ELT textbooks: A closer look at New American Inside Out. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 8(2), 189–210. <https://www.earticle.net/Article/A182320>
- Christos, A. (2025). Gender representations and school textbooks: Exploring sexism through the illustration of primary school language textbooks in Greece. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 51(5), 12–28. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2025/v51i51895>
- Cleveland Clinic Medical. (2025, December 5). Adolescent Development. Cleveland Clinic. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/7060-adolescent-development>
- Crawford, L., Saintis-Miller, C., & Todd, R. (2024). Sexist textbooks: Automated analysis of gender bias in 1,255 books from 34 countries. *PLoS ONE*, 19(10), e0310366. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0310366>
- Dawar, M., & Anand, S. (2017). Gender bias in textbooks across the world. *International Journal of Applied Home Science*, 4(3 & 4), 224–235. <https://tinyurl.com/yhe7zb94>
- Escayg, K. (2019). “Who’s got the power?”: A critical examination of the anti-bias curriculum. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy/International Journal of Child Care and Education*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-019-0062-9>
- Forman, J., & Damschroder, L. (2007). Qualitative content analysis. In L. Jacoby & L. A. Siminoff (Eds.), *Empirical Methods for Bioethics: A Primer* (pp. 39–62). Elsevier. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1479-3709\(07\)11003-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1479-3709(07)11003-7)
- Gasa, V. (2017). Social justice and inclusion of children with diverse needs in mainstream schools. In *Advances in religious and cultural studies (ARCS) book series* (pp. 171–185). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-2578-3.ch011>
- Gharbavi, A., & Mousavi, S. A. (2012). A content analysis of textbooks: Investigating gender bias as a social prominence in Iranian High School English textbooks. *English Linguistics Research*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v1n1p42>
- Gurung, L., & Rajbanshi, R. (2020). Gender assessment of teacher education curricula: A case study of Kathmandu University, School of Education. *Social Inquiry Journal of Social Science Research*, 2(2), 38–63. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v2i2.33044>
- Gurung, L., & Rajbanshi, R. (2020). Gender assessment of teacher education curricula: A case study of Kathmandu University, School of Education. *Social Inquiry Journal of Social Science Research*, 2(2), 38–63. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v2i2.33044>
- Singh, T. K., & Chandel, P. K. (2022). Peer pressure and peer influence in children and adolescence. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(3), 1792–1801. <https://doi.org/10.25215/1003.186>
- Inayah, I., Widayanti, L., Maesaroh, M., Mulyana, A., & Udin, T. (2026). Schools and classrooms in a sociological perspective. *Journal of English Language and Education*, 11(1), 29–39. <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i1.1145>
- Islam, K. M. M., & Asadullah, M. N. (2018). Gender stereotypes and education: A comparative content analysis of Malaysian, Indonesian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi school textbooks. *PLoS ONE*, 13(1), e0190807. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190807>
- Joseph, S., & Alhassan, I. (2023). Favouritism in higher education institutions: Exploring the drivers, consequences and policy implications. *European Journal of Human Resource*, 7(1), 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.47672/ejh.1515>
- Kookiattikoon, S., Kijpoonphol, W., Kluensuwan, P., Zhang, H., & Wider, W. (2024). Gender representations: A case study of semiotic analysis of gender bias in EFL textbooks. *International Journal of Religion*, 5(11), 7467–7485. <https://doi.org/10.61707/cwxm9232>
- Kornienko, O., Santos, C. E., Martin, C. L., & Granger, K. L. (2016). Peer influence on gender identity development in adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, 52(10), 1578–1592. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000200>
- Kumar, A., Kumari, A., McKeown, D., & Syed, H. (2025). Tale of textbooks: A critical discourse analysis of gender representation in Pakistani elementary English language textbooks. *Linguistics and Education*, 88, 101441. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2025.101441>

- Lanks, B. (2018, September 7). Gender stereotypes begin at age 10. The Hub. <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/09/07/gender-stereotypes-child-development/>
- Leavy, P. (2022). *Research design: quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Lewis, M., Borkenhagen, M. C., Converse, E., Lupyan, G., & Seidenberg, M. S. (2021). What might books be teaching young children about gender? *Psychological Science*, 33(1), 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211024643>
- Li, Y. (2025). The impact of gender stereotypes on the development of gender identity in early childhood. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 222, 03005. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202522203005>
- Mahmood, A., Yousaf, F., Bashir, A., & Parveen, S. (2022). Gender equality in English language textbook. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(2), 448–458. <https://doi.org/10.52131/pjhss.2022.1002.0209>
- Milligan, L. O., Balarin, M., Wilder, R., Nuwategeka, E., & Paudel, M. (2025). Education and justice in Nepal. In *Education as and for justice in the Global South: Case studies from Nepal, Perú and Uganda* (pp. 60–78). Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56687/9781529245172-008>
- Mitra, A., & Knottnerus, J. D. (2008). Sacrificing women: A study of ritualized practices among women volunteers in India. *VOLUNTAS International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 19(3), 242–267. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-008-9063-y>
- Nashriyah, Maulida, R., Ningsih, Y. S., & Yusuf, Y. Q. (2020). Addressing gender bias issues in elementary school EFL textbooks: An analysis of grow with English. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 8(3), 56–63. <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2020.837>
- Niazi, A. (2025). Education is the foundation of individual growth and social progress. *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, 5(4), 80–83. <https://doi.org/10.55544/ijrah.5.4.11>
- Paneru, N. R., Bishwokarma, B. R., & Bohara, B. B. (2026). Examining Dalit experiences on English language in Nepal: An empowerment perspective. *Education and Development*, 35(1), 89–96. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ed.v35i1.90369>
- Para, S. A. (2024). A qualitative content analysis exploring gender representation in language textbooks published by Jammu and Kashmir board of school education. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 10, 100959. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100959>
- Rong, J., Xue, G., Zhang, M., & Zhou, M. (2021). Gender bias in the curriculum: A reflection from the English textbook. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research/Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 571, 440–449. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210806.082>
- Rossouw, N., & Frick, L. (2023). A conceptual framework for uncovering the hidden curriculum in private higher education. *Cogent Education*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2023.2191409>
- Shah, R. K. (2015). Analysis of the primary education curriculum in Nepal from human rights perspectives. *Journal of Tikapur Multiple Campus*, 2(2), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jotmc.v2i2.69938>
- Shah, R. K. (2016). Gender analysis of primary social studies textbooks in Nepal. *Modern Research Studies*, 3(2), 294–315. <https://tinyurl.com/4ny7md9a>
- Sharma, H. M., & Basnet, S. (2024). Gender representation in Nepalese secondary level English textbooks: A multimodal analysis. *Interdisciplinary Research in Education*, 9(2), 72–89. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ire.v9i2.75025>
- Shava, G., Hleza, S., Tlou, F., Shonhiwa, S., & Mathonsi, E. (2021). Qualitative content analysis, utility, usability and processes in educational research. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, 5(7), 553–554. <https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/Digital-Library/volume-5-issue-7/553-558.pdf>
- Sims, R. N., Rizzo, M. T., Mulvey, K. L., & Killen, M. (2021). Desire to play with counterstereotypical peers is related to gender stereotypes and playmate experiences. *Developmental Psychology*, 58(3), 510–521. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001269>
- Smucker, A. D. (2022). Exploring the growth of inclusive curriculum: a systematic review of scholar and practitioner perspectives. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(12), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2121988>
- Suchana, A. A. (2025). Visual representation of gender in English language textbooks of Bangladesh and teachers' voices. *Asian Women*, 41(1), 167. <https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2025.3.41.1.167>
- Thulasivanthana, U. (2025). Visual representation of gender in English language textbooks. *Shanlax International Journal of English*, 13(4), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v13i4.9211>
- Tiwari, Y. (2024). Analyzing gender representation in English textbooks (IX & X) through Gender Schema Theory. *Lumbini Journal of Language and Literature*,

4(1), 123–144. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ljll.v4i1.73920>

Ullah, H., Ali, J., & Naz, A. (2014). Gender representation in children's books: A critical review of empirical studies. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 29(1), 134–141. <https://doi.org/10.5829/idosi.wasj.2014.29.01.13831>

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF]. (2023). Nepal Education Fact Sheets 2022. In *UNICEF Data*. UNICEF Nepal. Retrieved January 21, 2026, from https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Nepal_factsheet_Mar_2023.pdf

Vu, M. T., & Pham, T. T. T. (2022). Gender, critical pedagogy, and textbooks: Understanding teachers' (lack of) mediation of the hidden curriculum in the EFL classroom. *Language Teaching Research*, 29(7), 3143–3169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221136937>

Zhang, Y., & Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. In B. M. Wildemuth (Ed.), *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science* (2nd ed., pp. 318–329). Libraries Unlimited. https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~yanz/Content_analysis.pdf